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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines how one teacher educator explored the use of children's literature to introduce multiculturalism to her preservice teachers. It highlights how the teacher set the tone, structured the curriculum, identified books, and organized the book readings. Data were gathered from a personal teaching journal during the 5-month semester, from surveys and questionnaires used in the class, from videotapes of the class, and from student journals and interviews. It was found that life experiences alone did not ensure that diversity was accepted, understood, respected, and appreciated by the preservice teachers. Books were selected and organized to provide increased reader involvement in thinking about differences; learning strategies involved reading, reflection, and small and large group discussions. As the preservice teachers became more knowledgeable, articulate, and analytical about children's literature as a whole, they also developed a sense of literary heritage and realized the potential impact of their selections on their students. The preservice teachers also made explicit plans for using what they had learned. (Contains 37 references.) (NAV)

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Multicultural literature in a children's literature course: Opening a discussion on diversity

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Multicultural literature in a children's literature course: Opening a discussion on diversity

> "I think the most difficult thing in teaching, as well as the most interesting, is to get the children to tell you their real thoughts about things." (p. 89)
>
> Anne Shirley in Anne of Avonlea
> (L. M. Montgomery,1908)

What an illuminating observation! And as literature teachers how do we respond? How can we create a setting where students build connections between personal experiences and literature? What literary pathways can we best "talk" with our students in order to understand ourselves and the culturally diverse world around us? And how do we encourage our students to share candidly and openly their real thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding diversity?

If we are to move past the teaching of literature and into the world of living literature, we need to consider "what" literature has to offer. As the pages of a book fall open, an opportunity to examine life presents itself. This literary life can become a lens through which to view human behavior, and from that viewing, test the diversity of that behavior and hence, construct personal sociocultural values and feelings. Literature may contribute powerfully to help students understand images of the world, themselves, and the human condition (Rosenblatt, 1983).

In order to engage student in the "living" of literature, teachers need to bring into the classroom literature that reflects life in diverse ways, not necessarily those that are immediately recognizable to the student. As the students and teacher read and react to the literature, a pathway for understanding the unfamiliar may be formed. The humanity that all literature represents is understood first in the commonalities people share and then broadens to the limited and unknown as the students react to and identify with the character and plot.

This process of constructing cultural awareness can be severely hampered if the teacher is not prepared to address diversity. With the demographic shifts of the past decade, the character of public school classrooms everywhere has changed significantly (Barry, 1990). Additionally, there is evidence that knowledge about cultural and linguistic groups different from the white teacher is limited to their own cultural group. Values and characteristics of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics and American Indians are often unfamiliar (Bennett, 1989; Moultry, 1988; Wayson, 1988). Exposure to diversity must begin well before a teacher actually enters the classroom.

The following discussion centers around one teacher educator's reflection as she explores the use of children's literature to introduce multiculturalism to her preservice teachers. This paper is the result of Lea's "study of her own teaching." We will follow Lea as she relates from within her own classroom perspective, how she sets the tone, structures the curriculum, identifies books "with a difference," and how she organizes the book reading. We will see how her students live the literature, respond to the core readings, and extend their thinking through class talk. We then explore what life is like in the whole group setting and in small literature groups. The paper ends with Lea's student reflecting on their reading of multicultural children's literature.

Data for this case study consisted of a personal teaching journal with daily entries kept by Lea over a five month semester, surveys, and questionnaires used within the course, videotapes of all class sessions, student dialectical journals, student interview with all 27 students who finished the course, and an indepth follow-up survey of 10 completers. The case was developed by Lea, herself, as she took on the classic role of participant observer within her own class. Themes were allowed to emerge naturally as they were encountered by her students in the context of the classroom activities and discussions. Reflective inquiry was aided by the extensive data collection which enabled follow-up analysis for theme matching. Follow-up surveys were used to verify the

observed themes and to further challenge earlier researcher observations from the class context.

Teaching as research

An opportunity to explore cultural diversity can be provided within the context of a children's literature course in teacher education so that preservice teachers may begin to construct a personal framework to address multiculturalism. Within this case study, Lea probes the use of multicultural children's literature as a pathway to expose her students to issues of cultural diversity. She works from the hypothesis that as the students read and reflect on carefully selected literary texts, they are given an opportunity to gain an awareness of their own attitudes and belief systems about diversity. This reading, reflecting, and discussing provides a lens through which new conceptual and applied knowledge may be acquired. Lea conjectures that it is through the voice of a cultural protagonist, that as readers we are able to look "inside" what it may be like to be different. This "insider's" perspective will present an opportunity for there to be a mismatch between the realities of the cultural protagonist and the reader. This mismatch allows cognitive dissonance to occur.

> As an individual I have never been big on welfare and social programs. But when I read storys [sic] where the children sleep in alleys and eat out of garbage cans, I must reevaluate my thinking. ...Because I have never seen street people and extreme ghetto situations, this book sometimes seemed like Science Fiction. (Mike)

When the literary text content does not match the student's attitudinal belief systems, an attitudinal change needs to take place for the learner to accept new knowledge.

> ...about one-third of the way through the book [In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson (Lord, 1984)] as I wrote 'S' for superstition, it came to me that these were not Chinese-American superstitions; they were Chinese-American beliefs, and I should honor and respect them even though they are different from my beliefs. I felt enlightened and appreciated

the gift." (Jan)

Thus, this cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium created by the cultural protagonist's perspective stimulates students to become reflective thinkers about multicultural issues. Although this will not necessarily create cultural appreciation, it may initiate an awareness -- the beginning of tolerance. As a follow-up to this reading, preservice teachers were asked if reading children's literature with culturally diverse protagonists had influenced their perception of cultural groups. A student commented, "I now see the diversity in the classroom which is where I need to put away all stereotypes and by my reading [of children's books] this semester, I have [begun] to work on doing so." (Amy)

Setting the tone

As Lea initiates class by reading Emily (Bedard, 1992), a basic tenet of her process is revealed. It is her primary intention to develop the teacher's role as a demonstrator (Smith, 1983) -- one who shows through her own behaviors and words a person subject to biases and misinformation about differences. This public examination demonstrates 1) a use of children's literature to explore held beliefs and attitudes about differences and 2) an example that portrays learning as a risk taking endeavor. It thereby begins to establish this learning environment as one where books may be used to examine personal sociocultural values and feelings. In essence, the subject matter of multicultural children's literature is coupled with reading, reflecting, and talking to create an environment where those who will teach may vicariously live aspects of their students' diverse sociocultural lives.

Each preservice teacher thus begins their own multicultural awareness journey by first identifying their current beliefs about, experiences with, and feelings toward other cultural groups. A questionnaire (Smith, 1993) is provided for reflection and response. Typical responses follow:

I grew up in a rural farming area. There were no other cultural groups in this area until a few years ago when

Mexicans were hired to work for some farmers. (White female age 28)

As I was growing up, the cultural groups that I was exposed to were very similar. They were mostly white middle class families of similar religion. I attended a private elementary school and high school at that time. I don't feel

I was exposed to very many different cultures. The only culture different from my own that I feel I was able to learn about was from the Italian family that lived next door to me for 4 years. (White female age 27)

Whites were the only race around--only contact I had with other cultural groups were at school. (White male age 22)

I have lived [here] all my life. My parents, however, are from Alabama. We travel[ed] a lot to and from the Southern States. I have lived in an [sic] predominately all white neighborhood and my only interaction with African-Americans or other cultures was in school. This may sound strange because, I, am African-American. Most of my friends are Euro-Americans and few are of other descent. The first significant happening that has impacted my life was the first time I had heard someone use the word 'nigger' in my presence. I was only in the 4th grade and knew the word had bad connotations or negative connotations. This was my first experience to the negative slurs about my own heritage. (African-American female age 22)

Unfortunately, I have not had much contact at all with different cultural groups. So far, the only contact I have had has been here at the University... (White female age 24)

I am African-American. I don't know much about my cultural heritage. I have not had much of my cultural history taught to me in class. (African-American age 20)

When I visited Canada (Quebec), I remember feeling pretty bad about myself because of the way I judged the people up there. The people seemed to me to be overweight, and I

snobbily compared them to people from the U.S. who are so into fitness and health. I felt so bad after thinking such things. I had to tell myself 'my goodness, there's more to life than being in shape.' (White female age 21)

I have visited Miami Beach. The Cubans were aggressive and not polite. Why? I have had a short stay in Arizona and wondered at the way the Indians live there. They have separate schools, reservations etc. Today! Their laws sometimes hurt them. I have lived in a rural town and I learned so much about the Amish people and just [what] very little it takes to be happy. (White female age 49)

As evidenced by these responses, it is apparent that life experiences have not been enough, in many cases, to ensure that the richness of diversity will be accepted, understood, respected, and appreciated by these preservice teachers. The questionnaire involves the preservice teachers in a reflective look at their experiences with diverse groups of people. In follow-up discussions, students are able to vocalize their need to learn about diversity since the limitedness of their own feelings and responses surprise them. "This may be terrible, but I hadn't thought about it too much." (White female) "I need to become more sensitized to the differences in people." (White female) "My knowledge of cultural diversity is very limited." (White female) "I was aware, but not well-informed. I have an interest but haven't done anything about it." (Black female) "I have a lot of concern but very little knowledge." (White female) "I had not really thought about it before this class." (White male) This questionnaire stimulates the preservice teacher's willingness to examine and begin to accept a new or more extensive way of thinking about multicultural issues. Our journey begins with our own stories and from this personal base, we can begin to be open to the diversity around us. With this initial introspection, the class can now begin to approach children's literature as a theater for exploring diversity.

Structuring the curriculum

Throughout the history of the United States, there has been strong belief in the power of literature to shape students' values and direct the path of the American society (Applebee, 1991). Lea infuses diversity into a study of children's literature by using children's books with young protagonists who represent the different voices of our world. Stories with a strong protagonist voice can help students recognize the richness of our diverse culture and, thus, gain an awareness for those differences. The protagonist's perspective helps the reader feel the poignancy of the character's thoughts and feelings, confusion and frustration, fears and hopes (Cai, 1992). Through the protagonists' voices, students can begin to empathize and understand how others may live and view life. Yet, the intent of reading culturally diverse literature is not to make the preservice teachers "cultural diversity experts," but rather to raise their awareness and sensitize them to the differences that exist in the classrooms they will share with children. The selection of literature, rich in authenticity of culture is, therefore, paramount. A careful and thoughtful reading of currently available picture and chapter books that present cultural protagonists in plots that reveal common life themes is the first challenge.

Identifying books with a difference

Selecting books that aid in the breaking down of misconceptions and stereotypes about "other" (Rochman, 1993) is becoming more difficult as a perfusion of books that would first appear to be "multicultural" are placed on book store shelves. If literature is to provide a lens for viewing diversity, Lea has to consider several controversial issues as she previews books. These issues reflect a cultural sensitivity (Taxel, 1995) as to who can speak, what perspective should be presented, and what defines a cultural group. Issues include, but are not limited to: Does the author have to be a member of the cultural group of the characters the story is about? Does the geographic or historical setting

alone make the story "multicultural?" Are authentic situations, true to the cultures involved, occurring in the story? Does the story provide more than one narrow point of view? Is an historical perspective, limited to current understanding, presented? And, will the book contribute to the preservice teacher's willingness to tolerate and subsequently appreciate the diversity they will find in the classroom?

A "real" and meaningful book for use in addressing multiculturalism must be "culturally-specific" (Harris, 1993) and must "delineate character, setting, and theme, in part by detailing the specifics of daily living that will be recognizable to members of the group" it identifies (p 44). If the book meets these criteria, is there a need to define absolutes to the questions of author, setting, historical perspective, and appropriateness? In her book, Hazel Rothman (1993) powerfully responds when she writes,

> Yes, authenticity matters, but there is no formula for how you acquire it. Anybody can write about anything -- if they're good enough. There will always be inauthentic or inaccurate books, and defining authenticity on some exclusionary basis or other won't change a thing. The only way to combat inaccuracy is with accuracy -- not with pedigree (p 23).

Lea focuses her search on finding pieces of literature that will extend her students' held perceptions and set them to asking questions, questions that will move them beyond what they already know about diversity. Literature, in all forms, depicts the endless possibilities of our lives and the lives of those around us. Through the expression of human experience, the reader is drawn into close contact with those who may be different (Rosenblatt, 1938).

Keeping in mind the issues of cultural sensitivity, she looks for books that "unsettle" her -- stories that make her question her held beliefs, and move her in a direction of thought with subsequent action rather than preserving the status quo. Numerous pieces of multicultural literature are read. Literature reviewed include different genres: autobiographies, biographies, children's

fiction, short story anthologies, and poetry. Sources used to identify multicultural texts include Adventuring with Books (Monson, 1985), Sensitive Issues (Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992), Your Reading (Davis & Davis, 1988), The Children's Literature Catalog (Wilson, 1991, 1992), and Non Fiction for Young Adults: From Delight to Wisdom (Carter & Abrahamson, 1990), Teaching multicultural literature in Grades K-8 (Harris, 1993), Multiethnic Children's Literature (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994), Booklist (ALA) and Against Borders (Rochman, 1993).

Organizing the book reading

After Lea selects the literature, she organizes it as a text set (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) centered on diversity of cultural groups. This text set draws from all literary genre. Some of the books serve as read alouds in the classroom to focus and support discussion. Others are used to demonstrate strategies such as reader's theatre, dramatizations, or choral presentations for utilizing literature in a classroom setting. A core of chapter books, which all students read at designated times, serves as the hub for reading, reflection, and discussion.

This core of books is organized with the intent to provide increased readers' involvement in thinking about differences. The books portray diversity within the realm of human personalities, human situations, human conflicts and achievements. The readers examine diversity through the voice and experiences of a cultural protagonist. This interaction between the reader and the text most readily evokes a human response (Rosenblatt, 1938). And, it is from this perspective that the preservice teacher is supported vicariously to experience and explore different cultures. Bateson (1994) suggests that total understanding of diverse groups is not requisite in fostering sensitivity to "seeing" the world with new eyes. Learning about others can occur as we make the attempt to interact through the reading of literature. This reading of multicultural children's literature provides the preservice teacher with inroads to the many realities of self and world that exist in all classrooms.

Experiencing the literature

Reading is an interactive process that occurs between the reader and a text. This interaction becomes a transaction as the reader gives "life" to the pages of print. Yet, this transaction is an ebbing of "give and take" where the reader interprets meaning as the text affects the reader. This comprehension seeking process journeys along a continuum where at one pole -- efferent -- the reader's attention is singularly focused on grasping meaning while at the other pole -- aesthetic -- the reader's attention is directed, both cognitively and affectively, to all possibilities a text evokes. An aesthetic involvement with the text creates dimensionality that enables the reader to construct a personal, human, and lived-through response which ultimately is the literature experience. Without this human response, the text, play, or poem is no more than words, empty words on the page (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978, 1993). It is then, this human response that creates the distinction between reading literature and living literature. If reading multicultural children's literature is to impact critically the "thinking" of the preservice teacher, then this literature experience must naturally immerse them in relating to the human condition -- emotions and feelings -- that varies only in situation but is common to all cultures.

The teacher's role then centers on freeing the reader to journey toward personal involvement. For the teacher, initially, it is a significant challenge to direct students to be free in their thinking as well as their response. Directing and letting go at the same time seem quite disparate but are in fact necessary if the literature is to be lived. This "freeing" stimulates students to deal openly with their own reactions to the story: 1) personal implications, 2) points of personal contact, 3) commonalities and differences, 4) multiple perspectives, and 5) an attitude to question and wonder. As students begin to deal with their responses, an opportunity is created for them, in collaboration with the teacher, to navigate their exploration of the text as they employ it to make sense of their lives (Probst, 1988).

The spirit of the literature discussion is another facet of reader response. The issues in creating a climate conducive to the students' pursuit of aesthetic response include: 1) freedom to voice personal and social connections to the reading, 2) active involvement and commitment, 3) shared decision making where all voices are heard and valued, 4) caring attitude that encompasses ethical and moral behavior (Noddings, 1984). It is through this constructivist environment, that students will discover and construct meaning from prior experiences. They process information by analyzing data to detect patterns, forming and testing hypotheses, and integrating the new knowledge within their prior experience (Eklind, 1979; Piaget, 1969; Siegel, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). With all of this in mind, Lea initiates literature discussions in her Children's Literature class where students are presented with the opportunity and challenge of examining multicultural issues through a reading of literature. Her purpose is to examine aesthetic involvement with multicultural children's literature as an instrument to promote preservice teachers cultural awareness. The "tools" she concentrates on are literature response journals, large group discussions, small group discussions, and small group arts responses.

Responding to the core readings

For each of the chapter books in the set of core readings, Lea develops a reading guide that defines a timeline as well as provides background information on the genre of the book and author(s). She includes several reflection prompts and open-ended questions for discussion. It is important that these prompts and questions be broad enough to encourage individual interpretations and reactions. An example of a literature guide for A Jar of Dreams (Uchida, 1981) appears in Appendix A. Students are asked to record their reactions and responses to the readings in a reading log -- a personal notebook or journal. Students are invited to thoughtfully respond, and record their responses, as these books "speak" to them.

Karen, in her response to the reading of Uchida's book,

writes,

> "I have probably never experienced the total rejection that Rinko felt in being called a 'Jap,' but being overweight and being called 'fat' has been dehumanizing. The worst part of the bias is that as a young child you don't ever get the feeling you have the 'right' to have self-esteem. That fact is the biggest hurdle. Once you get past that then you can help yourself to like yourself or at least accept yourself."

Clearly, Karen's experience is not the exact situation of the book's protagonist, yet she is able to identify and powerfully capture the "shared" feelings of being an outsider. What is critical is Karen's willingness to relate to the character on a personal level. Karen's experience of being excluded involves her vicariously in the prejudices of difference toward the protagonist. She moves toward an awareness of what it may have been like to be a Japanese American in the 1930's through this experience.

Through her journal writing, Karen also shows us she is "in action." She recognizes the bias directed at her in her own life which began in childhood, and she acknowledges what feelings and doubts this bias has done to her. As she relates her own feelings to those of the protagonist, she generalizes what bias does to a child. Thus, she has established an awareness that may be generalized to include other prejudices. It is believed this awareness will lead Karen to be responsive to the diversity she will meet in her classroom. Yet, there is much more to the process than this small step. Karen must move from this awareness to formalizing action through "talk."

Extending thinking through talk

Each book in the multicultural text set is likely to present a way of life dissimilar to that of the preservice teacher. This disequilibrium may best be sorted through in a process of think, talk, listen, and respond. Thus, it is essential that a "safe place" be established where all ideas and all thinking outloud is

encouraged and supported as worthwhile. Within this environment, a literary community will begin to evolve as the preservice teachers invest in their talk as members of literature groups. This talking community examines and explores the disequilibrium that may exist between members' life experiences and that of the literary protagonist. Talk to and with others is fundamental to the creation of meaning that follows a process of reading (Watson, 1993). As the students read a selected book, they form ideas that may be disjointed. Yet as the students talk with others, they will be given a chance to listen to their own thinking and the thinking of others. This thinking will be discussed, responded to, and subsequently may become more jointed. This cycle will occur again and again, each time refining and extending the preservice teachers' awareness of and willingness to respond to diversity. One setting for talk within a literary community is a whole group discussion.

Life in whole group discussions

During weekly class sessions, the large group comes together to talk through their reading of the text. In this setting students are invited to voice their primary responses to the piece of literature (Rosenblatt, 1938). Students sit in a circle, snuggled securely next to each other, with full view of the circumference, and are drawn into a visual sharing of ideas as they talk, listen, respond, and think about their reading of <u>The shimmershine queens</u>, (Yarbrough, 1989). Typically, Lea opens the large group discussion with an invitation, "What shall we do with this book?" By offering this challenge, students are enticed to become the drivers of the discussion. As the discussion unfolds, Lea often reveals one of her own personal reactions that uncovers her own biases and interpretations. This honest introspection seems to hook the students into being willing to reveal their own gut level responses. From this opening, students seize control and drive the discussion along the varying avenues to examine the diversity presented in the text.

As a student in Lea's class, Karen is anxious to explore her

reactions to the book The shimmershine queens (Yarbrough, 1989). This children's text has evoked some uncomfortable feelings which stem from her own childhood. She initially identifies with the protagonist Angie's family situation, and it is from this "shared reality" that Karen begins to consider how an individual's cultural identity ultimately influences how they deal with a situation.

Karen offers to the group, "I felt so much anger towards Angie's family situation because it could have been my own. My parents divorced when I was 9 years old and this threw me into the role of being an 'adult child' who had to take care of my younger sisters and brothers. Like Angie, one way I escaped this reality was daydreaming. And, I was fortunate to have teachers who were just like Ms. Collier."

Another student voices her shared connection with the story. "I could never survive in this environment and I could begin to see why Angie began to steal to express her anger." (Bobbie) And, the others eagerly begin to voice their observations and reactions. At first, the talk centers around the events in the story. One event -- the schoolyard fight between Charlene and Angie is of particular interest. "I don't understand why Charlene called Angie a 'slave'? They were both African-American, weren't they?"

Another asserts, "It is the 'too syndrome'. Everyone criticizes others for being too too -- too tall, too ugly, too dumb, too smart, or too proud."

Rob offers "It could be anything because people feel uncomfortable when there is anything different."

Angela suggests, "Charlene felt bad about herself so she decided to pick on Angie. Angie was beginning to feel good about herself and have a sense of pride in who she is and her heritage. And Charlene just couldn't accept Angie's growing sense of self-appreciation."

As different scenes in the story are discussed the students move toward a more thorough and thoughtful examination of their responses. In one scene of the story, Angie thinks her father will not show up for the play. Rather than talking with someone about

her disappointment, Angie acts out by stealing lipstick in a drugstore. This incident provides furtive ground for conflicting impressions. "It's just survival. It isn't such a big deal for a kid to steal. Plus, no one was there for her, at least most of the time. Wasn't she 'expected' to cut school to stay home and take care of her sisters?" (Andrew) "It just makes me appreciate my own family and how they were always there and cared for me. It would never cross my mind that my father wouldn't go to something I was starring in." (Jessica)

Karen responded, "Well, I do understand, yet I have difficulty in how Angie reacted to her disappointment. That's where I had the biggest problem with Angie. Even though our family situations were so identical, I didn't act like she did. I tried not to be angry with Angie. I didn't want to judge her, but her stealing was just wrong."

Jennifer retorted, "I think Andrew's point is basically it. Angie was surviving in what she knew. We shouldn't generalize or judge. Didn't she ultimately recognize it wasn't right?"

Karen answered, "That's what I understood, but I did suffer with her because she made bad choices. It's funny, though, that she was stronger than many of the other characters. I really liked that Ms. Collier was such a good teacher. She kept pointing out that it's weakness that makes people lose self control. I had great respect for her, like when my teachers would love and forgive me when I couldn't cope with life. Instead of hassling me, they asked me what was wrong. No one ever rescued me out of my home, but just knowing someone cared helped. Life still hurt, though."

Wendy proposes, "This story really helped me to visualize what happens to children who have difficult home situations. It made me appreciate the difficulties that so many children have and as a teacher I will never know or understand everything that happens in a household, but I can seek to accept and understand the child better."

The students begin to risk revealing their feelings and ideas which may make them feel most uncomfortable. The talk begins to get

more specific; the sharing gets more intimate. Karen realizes that her confusion is shared by others. Her feelings become almost overwhelming until she offers, "I know that I am going to have to face that this is reality. I can't pretend or think that mine is the only one -- any better or any worse."

Angie offers, "It's too tempting to attribute something to a racial group. I can't do that as a teacher. I have to try to think from another viewpoint. I have to stop and realize that the kids are probably coming from a whole different background than I am." This comment allows her to tie what she is hearing to how she might deal with diversity in her own future classroom. The group moves from an onerous tone to creating a plan of action. Some of the talk is more hopeful than pragmatic, yet the tone holds resolve.

Each time a new text is discussed, the pathway is similar. The discussion, however, becomes more thorough as the comfort level of the members of the large group grows. Each time the number of students willing to share and take risks increases. Even so, some students choose to listen instead of participate in the whole group discussion. The small literature group creates a setting where all members are supported to contribute.

Life in small literature groups

Whirling, swirling, and twirling around the classroom to dramatize "House Crickets" (Fleischman, 1988) the small group portrays their interpretation of an assigned section of the poem. Combined, in sequential order, this large-group playing builds small group identity while contributing to the greater group's growth as a whole. The students reflect their bonding as they laugh and applaud each other in their efforts.

Personal investment by the student with ownership of the learning experience is essential. If the preservice teacher is to work through the layers of misconceptions on the issues of diversity and walk away with expanded awareness then they must, from the inception, be given a voice in the learning process. One

way for students to have a "say" in their learning is in small discussion groups. The primary function of these groups is to create an intimate setting where students may openly explore and express their views on diversity without fear of rejection or ridicule. To create this intimate social setting, each small group of not more than four students participates in varying experiences which support them to "bond" together as a team. Lea uses strategies such as reader's theatre, story dramatization, arts story representation, characterization predictions, and story/character webs to pull students together on a common goal to nurture their accepting, valuing, and respecting of each other. These endeavors, limited by scope and time, require the small group to focus and make a definitive collaborative response to share with the large group.

The small group promotes a social setting where preservice teacher students can be supported to form relationships and dialogues with others (Short, 1990). This kind of social learning environment encourages them to express, think through, evaluate and ultimately, take responsibility for how they will personally respond to the diversity they will meet in a classroom setting. Lea trusts that the small group dialogue will enable her students to disclose their human responses to the issues of prejudices, biases, and misunderstanding as represented on the pages of the multicultural books they read.

Reflecting on the small group setting, Roberta shares, "We felt safe to voice our dissenting opinions" "I liked the small groups because they encouraged us to take risks as well as developing our creativity, sensitivity, respect, and empathy for others." (Heather) Lea recognizes that it is in this more private setting that the sensitive issues can come out and be talked about with a sense of security and acceptance. This stance would also predispose the large group discussion to be more substantive.

Acknowledging our multicultural journey

More than realizing a specific destination, the preservice teacher students realize they are in the midst of a process of

traveling. Their acknowledgment comes as they reflect in large group discussion on what they feel they have seen, questioned, achieved, and accomplished in understanding others and themselves. As they have become more knowledgeable, articulate, and analytical about children's literature as a whole, they have also developed a sense of literary heritage and recognized the impact it has had on them and will have on their own students.

"That's what this is all about -- these books. They provide windows to cultures and things we haven't thought about and are really valuable. We can get different perspectives -- to see. (Jessica)

Lea brings the students back to their own future classrooms. She questions them as to how they will pursue many of the issues they have addressed during the course of interacting with the literature. "I will definitely have literature discussions where students talk about their personal connections to the story. I love to talk about books! It gives me a goal for my own classroom discussions." (Roberta)

Karen realizes, "I didn't know how far I had to go in celebrating difference. I still don't realize how far it is. I do know that it can be a lot more interesting and more painful than I ever thought. It really is work -- to understand others."

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